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ABSTRACT

The Research for Better Schools Urban Education Project is working with teachers in Baltimore (Maryland) and Washington (District of Columbia) to reduce the alienation of many urban students by exploring how to align what students bring to school with classroom learning. This effort is centered around the concept of learner experience, an outgrowth of the project's Urban Learner Framework (ULF), which presents the urban learner as capable, motivated, resilient, and able to build on cultural strengths. The experiences of students in school and outside school are aspects of learner experience. Relating the two is seen in inner-city Baltimore schools where efforts to integrate learner experience into the formal curriculum and an increased awareness of the strengths students bring with them to the classroom have resulted in more respect and greater student achievement. In the District of Columbia the ULF has been used in lesson infusion plans that make sure that student background and curriculum content are connected. In both cities, plans are being made to extend ULF concepts into other schools. (Contains 2 figures and 17 references.) (SLD)

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LEARNER EXPERIENCE STRATEGIES IN TWO URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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Learner Experience Strategies
In Two Urban School Districts

Mrs. Smith is perplexed about her student Tony, a fifth grader at Benjamin Banneker Elementary School. She is aware that during class he is often talking to one or more students who listen to him with interest. He appears disengaged from most class activities but excited about whatever it is he is discussing with his peers. Mrs. Smith reprimands Tony for his conduct but she has a growing sense that something is happening with this young man. Although frustrated by Tony's behavior, Mrs. Smith refrains from taking disciplinary action and contemplates the situation.

A sixth grade teacher in an urban district is preparing to teach her students about the geological process of volcanoes and the environmental effects they have on humans. As she considers how to introduce this topic, she reviews her curricular materials. In the introductory segment that provides a background for investigating volcanoes, students are asked to surface any information they already know about volcanoes. While she believes this topic is important for her children to study, she wants the students to create **their** framework for understanding the content before they are asked to work with the curriculum content. She does not feel this lesson in its current form will connect to the students' experiences and engage them in meaningful ways.

Every day urban teachers are confronted with these kinds of dilemmas and make decisions about students, curriculum content, and instructional strategies which affect the academic success of urban learners. Their decisions directly influence the extent to which learners engage in the formal curriculum of the school. Research and theory suggest that when teachers have a thorough knowledge about their students and their backgrounds, they are better able to engage those students in formal learning because they can use this knowledge in every facet of educational decision making (Knapp, et al., 1993; Overton, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978).

Currently the Research for Better Schools (RBS) Urban Education (UE) Project is working with educators in Baltimore, MD and Washington, DC to reduce this alienation by exploring how to align

what students bring to school with classroom learning. UE is addressing the dilemmas described at the beginning of this article with a construct called **learner experience (LE)**. In this article, UE experiences in Baltimore, MD and Washington, DC will be described as examples of how the construct of learner experience has been introduced in two large urban districts to strengthen student engagement. The construct of learner experience will be defined and strategies to identify and integrate LE with instructional activities will be outlined.

Learner Experience

The concept of learner experience is an outgrowth of the UE Project's conceptual framework, **The Urban Learner Framework** (ULF). The ULF categorizes research and theory to present a "New Vision of the Urban Learner." The "New Vision" presents urban learners as capable, motivated, resilient learners able to build on their cultural strengths. It rejects current perceptions of urban children as at risk, lacking abilities, unmotivated, and culturally deprived. The goal of schooling that underlies this "New Vision" is the development of autonomous individuals able to participate in making decisions about their future and society. (For a more complete discussion of the ULF see "Building on the Strengths of Urban Learners," *Educational Leadership*, May 1994.)

Learner experience (LE) is a construct used to describe all of the dynamic environmental or contextual influences that help to shape students' learning -- their thinking, language, knowledge, belief systems, values, and actions. These influences result from interactions in the home, the school, and the community at large.

To simplify matters from an educational perspective, we can look at LE in terms of originating from two sources: in-school LE and outside-of-school LE. In-school LE results when the learner interacts both with the formal curriculum and with the educators, norms, rules, and other aspects of the school culture. Outside-of-school LE results when the learner goes about daily life apart from school activities. Most teachers gather and use information about in-school LE (school records, achievement test data,

teachers' comments, etc.); however, the amount of knowledge about and the consistent use of outside-of-school LE vary considerably with each teacher. In some cases, teachers are unfamiliar with important aspects of outside-of-school LE. Barbara Bowman (1992, p. 133) points out that:

> children from inner-city communities, for example, often do not come to schools or centers having had the experiential background that ties easily to the reading materials considered most appropriate for young children. Books focus on baby animals, zoo animals, pets, milkmen, kind policemen, grass, and flowers -- ideas and concepts not frequently encountered in the children's daily lives. When children do not have the relevant background, they do not learn "naturally" in the seamless and organic way that teachers have been led to expect.

An emerging body of evidence (Knapp, et al., 1993; Macleod, 1991; Moll, et al., 1992; Sylvester, 1994; Villegas, 1991) suggests that teachers who continually learn about and consistently use out-of-school LE are able to create caring classroom environments where urban learners are more motivated, learn better, and feel more positively about themselves. The strategies UE has developed are suggestions for tapping and using the out-of-school experiences of urban learners in the teaching and learning process. Hopefully, these strategies will encourage educators to increase their knowledge of LE, and the value of identifying the opportunities to incorporate this knowledge.

The Baltimore Experience: Guided Observations to Identify LE Connections

Following UE's introduction of the ULF, Baltimore principals and teachers participated in three guided observations designed to surface the out-of-school experiences of urban learners and to determine the extent that these strengths were used in instructional and other school-related activities. The content of these observations is outlined in Figure 1.

During the initial phase of student observations, several Baltimore educators selected students who were characterized as "behavioral problems" with descriptors such as disruptive, disengaged, easily distracted, engrossed in a private adventure, and having difficulty staying focused. Upon further study, with a focus on looking for strengths, the educators found that many of these same students had previously unidentified interests, talents, and skills that were not understood, valued or used as a bridge to connect them to their daily school experiences. One student who was a third grade repeater tutors

another student and wants to help that child be more successful in school. Another student who was a second grade repeater is a lover of birds with a growing collection of his own. With money earned from chores, he bought a bird named Snowball and later bought another one named Cocoa. His face lights up as he speaks avidly about his pets. A third student who has difficulty reading has high verbal skills and is a take charge person whose friendship is sought by his classmates. The observation descriptions are rich with information about these children's love of math games, computer activities, and science experimentation; deep knowledge of sports and how following the coach's directions and paying attention is so important; and their hopes and dreams of becoming a scientist, a video game designer, a pilot, and a businessman -- "just like my grandfather." This exercise provided a view and definitions of urban learners' strengths that are often not seen by those who teach them on a daily basis.

The observations of classroom and school activities provided some examples of the ways learners' experiences are recognized as well as examples of missed opportunities to make meaningful connections with the students. On the positive side, observation data yielded examples of students engaged in cooperative learning groups; the use of movement activities and games as instructional aids; a first grade math lesson using a student birthday graph; a fifth grade lesson on gun control that encouraged personal experiences and multiple points of view; a fourth/fifth grade social studies lesson comparing and contrasting the students' experiences with living conditions during the time of President Kennedy's assassination; morning meetings which integrate social and academic skills as students share personal experiences related to a topic and learn how to listen, participate, and care; and efficacy training (Howard, 1991) which emphasizes committed effort toward intellectual development and techniques to instill discipline in study and work habits. Field trips to the Baltimore Zoo, school clubs, Afrocentric and multicultural hall displays, Big Brother/Big Sister Programs, community sponsored little leagues, and volunteers from the community were examples of schoolwide activities participants observed during their investigations. Missed opportunities were most evident in the curriculum and/or teacher-centered instruction that did not connect to the students experiences, homogeneous groupings (tracking) that

thwarted the chance for students to learn from and be supported by their peers, and students who were bored and disengaged from the learning tasks. Additionally, it was not evident that community activities and resources were integrated into academic activities as a way to validate intellectual development in the community and connect school learning to real world situations.

The Baltimore experience has helped many of the participants understand the significance of expanding their efforts to integrate learner experiences with the formal curriculum. Coming to the sessions as school teams created the opportunity for them to study and learn together. Engagement in serious discussion can facilitate focused educational improvement planning and enhance the academic experiences of urban students in their school district.

The District of Columbia Experience: Using Learner Experiences to Develop Meaningful Instruction

After being exposed to the ULF and the idea of using LE to make classroom learning more relevant to urban learners, DC educators wanted to explore more ways to make better connections with their students. In response to that need, UE staff developed a lesson infusion process that suggests one way teachers can incorporate LE into their instructional activities (see Figure 2). This process is based on the ULF belief that students come to school with strengths that must be seen, valued, understood, and used in order for students to be successful socially, culturally, and cognitively (Gay, 1994; Haberman, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Williams & Newcombe, 1994).

During the fall of 1993 a sixth grade teacher in the District of Columbia Public Schools, participated in the New Vision of the Urban Learner Course. The theme and focus of this example are her ideas. UE staff developed her ideas further to create *The Volcano Lesson* as an example of lesson infusion. Excerpts from that lesson are described below.

The original sixth grade earth science lesson includes several activities developed to teach children about the geological processes of volcanoes and the environmental effects they have on humans. In the introductory segment that provides a background for investigating volcanoes, students are asked to share

any information they already know about volcanoes: where they exist, the effects they produce, how people are affected, and so forth. During the discussion, the teacher notes terms that will connect to future activities and asks students to look up the meaning of the terms as a prerequisite to the next lesson. Other activities include small-group research on one of the volcanoes and the creation of a map showing volcanic activity around the world.

In considering ways to infuse this lesson, we are suggesting that consideration be given to the connections that can be made between volcanoes and the lives of the Washington, DC sixth graders. It is important, then, to explore the answers to questions like: What about volcanoes really matters to the children? What experiences are similar? Can I develop a theme or concept related to volcanoes that will interest them and motivate them to explore these learning events with me?

Our answers led us to consider the theme eruptions as a way to make connections with the sixth graders. As we think about eruptions and the sixth graders, we envision them being able to surface experiences at a personal level, in their homes, in their community, and in school. We believe they can identify a range of examples dealing with eruptions, and we think their experiences will parallel the curricular focus.

The infused lesson begins with the students looking at the word "eruptions" that is written on the board. Students are asked if they can describe -- from their own experiences -- how they have been exposed to eruptions. The teacher uses a mind map to capture student responses ranging from eruptions of acne to eruptions of laughter or anger. In each case, students describe various aspects of an eruption that become the basis for making connection to the curriculum content. Although they use different terms, their prior knowledge of the nature of eruptions is clearly evident.

This infused lesson approach asks teachers to slow down and take time to think through their lesson and determine what really matters to their students regarding what they are preparing to teach. In this case, instead of being preoccupied with surfacing their prior knowledge about volcanoes, the teacher put the students ahead of her content and drew from them experiences that were in many ways analogous to

the volcanic eruptions. The students come with a wealth of knowledge. We believe it is the teacher's challenge to demystify the process of learning and help students understand how many of their daily experiences and knowledge share meanings with the formal curriculum content.

Lesson infusion, as illustrated by this example, is only one of many ways in which the background experiences of urban students can be connected with curriculum content. Teachers in Washington, DC report that the process allows them to strengthen the lessons they teach by initially considering what really matters to their children.

The Impact of the ULF

In both districts, educators are exploring the concepts and the changes required in beliefs and practice during on-going sessions over several weeks of time. Involvement is voluntary and sessions are organized around readings, videos, observations, discussions, and structured experiences that enable them to share their dilemmas, practice the strategies, and learn together in a collegial and supportive atmosphere.

ULF activities in Baltimore were initiated in the fall of 1994. Some Baltimore educators say they now plan to extend the ULF concepts into their schools with school-based study groups, a staff retreat, student interviews to access learner experiences, and use of the ULF as a foundation for focusing educational improvement planning on instructional modifications that enhance learning. In Washington, DC, the ULF became a major thrust of the district's Center for Systemic Educational Change in 1992. It currently serves as a philosophical underpinning that guides decisions about policy, programs, and practice.

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Figure 1
Guided Observation to Identify LE Connections

Observation I

Purpose: To make a deliberate attempt to see urban students from a strengths-based information gathering perspective.

1. Select a child with whom you will interact. Gather out-of-school information that can help you understand the life of the child. To make sure you get a broad picture, you may want to speak with people who know of the child's out-of-school experiences.

2. Use the following four questions to gather your information about the child:
   - What knowledge does the student have based on his/her out-of-school experiences?
   - What does the student do well in his/her out-of-school experiences?
   - What are the out-of-school issues, events, objects, people, and problems that most engage and excite the student?
   - Who are the significant caregiver(s) in the student's life?

Observation II

Purpose: To examine the degree to which the out-of-school experiences of urban students are reflected in classroom instructional patterns and in school interactions.

1. Record two or three examples of how the out-of-school experiences of the students are evident in classroom interactions.

2. Describe how the multiple abilities of students are reinforced and integrated/developed in classroom interactions and instructional strategies/patterns.

3. Describe how the out-of-school issues, events, objects, people, and problems that most engage and excite the students are integrated into classroom activities.

4. Record examples of how the lives of individual students are used in instruction and how knowledge of other supports for resilience (autonomy, high expectations, sense of future) is demonstrated.

Observation III

Purpose: To examine the school environment for examples of the recognition and valuing of student experiences, multiple abilities, interests, and resilience, i.e., the New Vision of the Urban Learner.

1. Record several examples of how the school environment (policies, practices, programs, community/parent involvement, staff development) already reflects the concepts of the ULF in practice.

2. Suggest opportunities to introduce change that will increase examples of the ULF in practice (planning, staff development, programs, etc.).

Figure 2

Urban Learner Framework and Lesson Infusion

The lesson infusion process includes four key components that enable teachers to consider the relationships among their beliefs, their students' experiences, and their classroom practices. Using the process requires you to:

- **Review your subject matter to determine what you plan to teach. Then ask yourself, "What really matters to the children regarding the lesson objective that I am planning to teach?"** Here we are suggesting that what teachers understand about how children learn and what they value regarding how children demonstrate their knowledge determine the extent to which the student becomes connected to learning. This is a critical first step because as teachers consider their instructional objectives, they are establishing the foundation for the remaining decisions that will influence the quality of the learning experience (Bowman, 1994).

- **Make a connection between the students' experiences and the curriculum content.** Student experiences include such things as household knowledge associated with earning a living (e.g., construction and building trades, vending and other small business ventures); values, beliefs, interests, and motivations representing things that are important to urban learners; and routine behaviors (e.g., communication and interaction patterns). These daily experiences are rich with examples that can be used to create themes, analogies, and other learning strategies that serve as powerful emotional, cognitive, and cultural connections between the learner and the content (Moll, et al., 1992; Stevens, 1993).

- **Begin your lesson with an activity that connects to the strengths students bring. Then, build on it with activities that draw on their experiences and further their learning**. Lesson activities that give student experiences a major role and center the learning event in the student's own experiences help the student become part of the curriculum (Asante, 1991; Haberman, 1994).

- **Reflect on the instructional experience to note new insights and considerations for change.** Reflection provides opportunities to think deeply about what one is doing, to ask better questions, to break out of fruitless routines, to make connections, and to experiment with fresh ideas. Reflection helps teachers to consider how well their beliefs and practices are aligned with the concepts of the ULF and it enables them to use that information as the basis for instructional decision making and change (Brandt, 1991; Williams & Newcombe, 1994).